

The Steller's Eider in Finnmark and Russia



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

The Steller's Eider is the least common of the world's diving ducks. In winter the species is common along the coast of eastern Finnmark, but may also be met with throughout the year in these areas. The Steller's Eider does not nest in Norway, but is an immigrant from Russian areas where it nests near freshwater pools inland on the tundra. A great decline in the population has been registered since the 1960s. The cause of this is unknown.

The Steller's Eider (*Polysticta stelleri*) is the smallest of the diving ducks, and is about the size of a Long-tailed Duck. The species is a member of the eider family, but differs from its two near relatives, not least by its size. Similarly to the Common and King Eiders, the Steller's Eider is social and prefers to gather in large flocks, often in company with the other two species. Its size enables the Steller's Eider to rise from the sea almost as easily as the dabbling ducks, thereby differing from its two heavier relatives.

The Steller's Eider breeds along the coasts in Alaska and Russia. The global population is estimated at between 110,000 and 125,000 birds. This is much lower than earlier estimates which were in the region of a half million birds in the 1960s. In Russia its main distribution is from Khatanga Bay and eastwards towards

the Bering strait. The population that winters in Europe is between 10,000 and 15,000 birds, this being a 50% reduction in 10 years. In recent years between 2000 and 3000 birds have wintered in the Varanger fjord. This great reduction has resulted in the Steller's Eider being listed as a "Species of European Conservation Concern (SPEC)" in 1994. In 1997 the nesting population in Alaska was also regarded as threatened. The Steller's Eider is placed on the Norwegian red list as vulnerable (VU). The criterion for this is that there is a small population in Norway and that an ongoing reduction in population has been registered.

The adult males are black and white with a pink breast patch, a green forehead and a green-black patch on the back of the white neck. The females are entirely brown, with the exception of a broad and distinct



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blue speculum with white edges. The bill is broad and relatively flat.

The breeding grounds of the Steller's Eider lie near freshwater pools and lakes. It nests from coastal areas to a good distance inland and may be found much further from the coast than the other eider species. The nest is placed hidden in vegetation near the water's edge.

The clutch usually consists of 6 to 8 eggs. The female is alone in brooding and caring for the young. As in other eider species several females can join in caring for a brood of young.

Distribution in Finnmark

In winter the Steller's Eiders stay mainly in the Varanger fjord with decreasing flock size from Vardø and west towards Syltefjord and Berlevåg. Smaller flocks of up to 100 birds can be met with as far west as the Nordkinn peninsula.

Diet and ecology

The Steller's Eider forages in shallow sea areas, preferably at depths of less than five metres and in areas with rich kelp forests. Here the main part of their food consists of crustaceans, snails and bivalves. At low tide the Steller's Eider often forages on mud banks in the same manner as dabbling ducks. They then feed on bivalves, crustaceans and worms. (invertebrates?) which they filter from the mud.

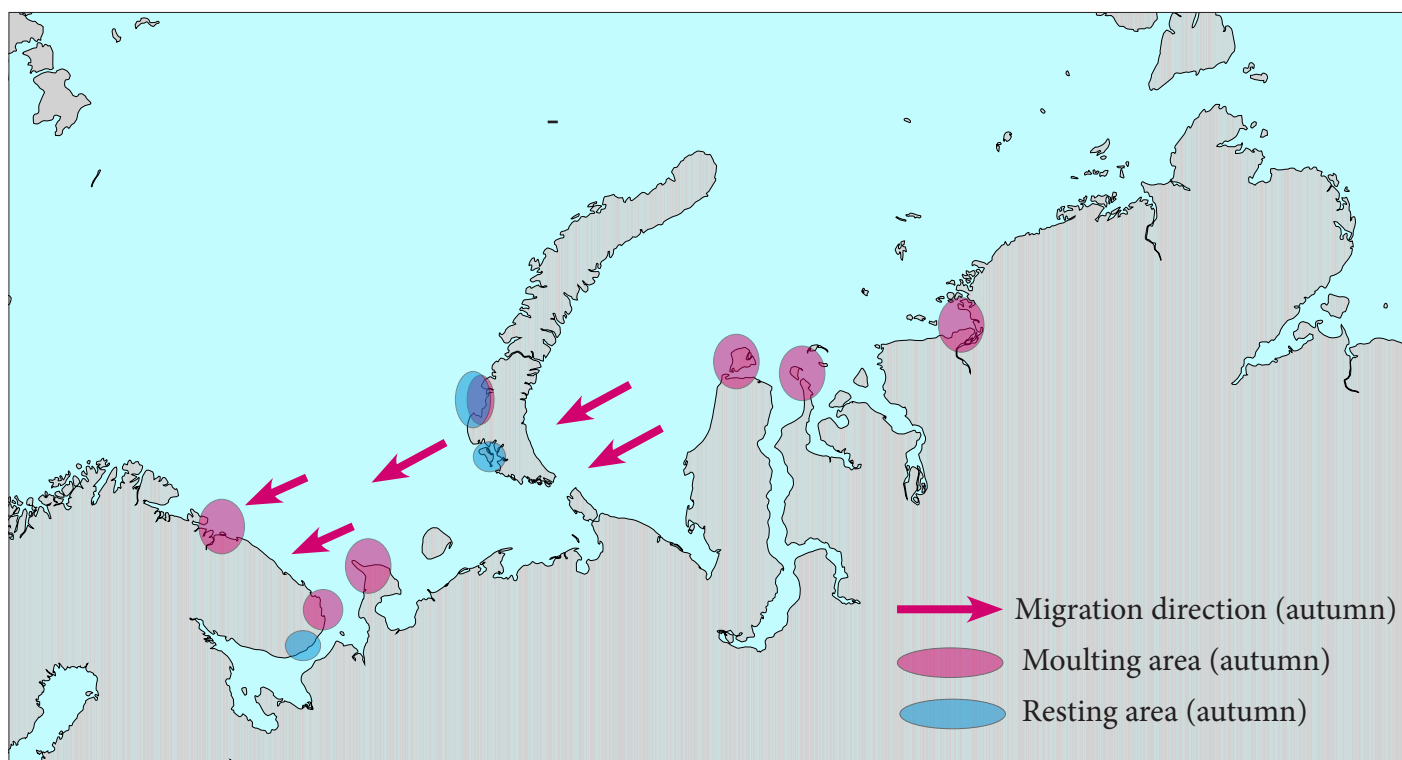
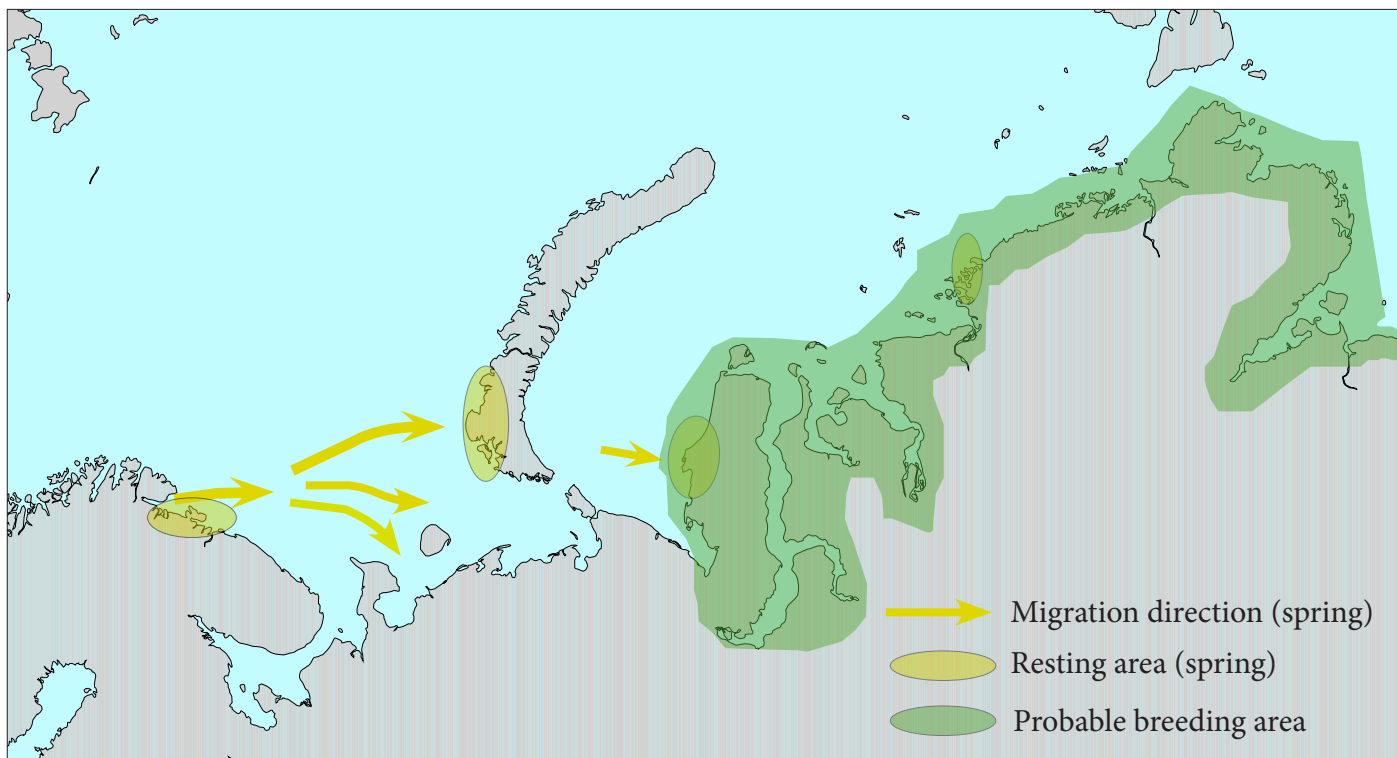
Migration and wandering

The Steller's Eiders that breed in Alaska and in north-eastern Siberia winter in the southern part of the Bering Sea. Those that breed further west along the Russian coast can migrate westwards after the breeding season. Some of the birds move to the Kola peninsula or further to the Norwegian coast. Some also move down to the White Sea and further southwards to the Baltic Sea. Wintering Steller's Eiders are regularly registered in Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Sweden.

The Steller's Eiders arrive at the wintering areas along the Varanger fjord and westwards in Finnmark during October and early November. Spring migration begins to a small extent in late April, but the major part of the spring migration takes place at the beginning of May and continues to the middle of the month. Studies with the aid of satellite transmitters have revealed the Steller's Eiders migration and movements between winter quarters and breeding grounds in Siberia. On spring migration the birds fly eastwards towards resting sites at the south-western end of Novaya Zemlya or the extreme south-eastern parts of the Barents Sea. After resting the birds migrate to the breeding areas further east in Siberia.

When the breeding season is over the birds move westwards to moulting sites. One such important site is on the west coast of Novaya Zemlya. Data indicate that





In spring the great majority of the Steller's Eiders that have wintered along the Norwegian coast will return to the breeding grounds in Russia. The migration begins in May, and they migrate over the Barents Sea to the west coast of Novaya Zemlya or move nearer the coast to the south-eastern parts of the Barents Sea, where they rest before continuing eastwards. After the breeding season the moulting areas are far from the breeding grounds. Most probably moult on the west coast of Novaya Zemlya. The birds remain near the moulting areas before they migrate quickly towards the Norwegian coast. Those that move to the Norwegian coast go first to the Kola peninsula before migrating further westwards. This information is taken from Petersen et. al. 2006.



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a large proportion of the Atlantic population of the Steller's Eider uses this area both in spring (resting site) and in autumn (for moulting and resting). From this area the Steller's Eiders move quickly to the coast of Kola and from there move further west to the Norwegian coast.

Threats

Outside the breeding season the Steller's Eider is exposed to oil spills as they often gather in dense flocks near the coast and in the neighbourhood of docks. A study using satellite transmitters has shown that large parts of the Steller's Eider population gather in relatively small areas on the west coast of Novaya Zemlya, especially in autumn. For a long period in autumn they are also flightless when they moult the wing feathers. An oil leakage in these areas can therefore strike a large part of the population.

As the Steller's Eider is a diving species that finds its food on the sea floor, it is also exposed to drowning in fishing nets that are set in shallow waters. Especially net fishing for lumpsuckers leads to Steller's Eiders being caught as bycatch.

The Steller's Eider is protected both in Norway and in parts of Russia, i.e. in the regions where it breeds (Kamchatka, Sakhalin, Chukotka, Yakutia, and Krasnoyarsky district). Illegal hunting in winter may have increased in the eastern part of the Murmansk coast. Other possible threats are deterioration of foraging areas (e.g. due to excessive grazing of kelp by sea urchins) and collision with power cables and wind turbines.

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